



During that same opening week of graduate school that I was introduced to Kuhn's 'radical' ideas, my Stanford-educated roommate suggested that, if I had serious ambitions as a developmental anthropologist, then I absolutely had to come with her to Madison Square Garden to hear this brilliant global thinker expound on his grand design for ending world hunger!

The prospect sounded totally absurd. Ending world hunger was right up there with solving world peace and climate change. The chances that I would be able to contribute meaningfully to the discussion were close to nil. But Madison Square Garden suggested that there was some substance to be had – and, as a newbie, I was in no position to sniff at an opportunity to learn new ideas.

So there I sat – listening to the sarcastic but astonishingly seductive rantings of one Werner Erhard from **est** – a group he founded to demonstrate how we human beings could do astonishing things simply by changing the way we talked about addressing problems.



Erhard set the tone for the evening perfectly by suggesting that any educated person would be justified in being hugely sceptical of a claim that we could end world hunger. But he also achieved something that psychologists would only begin to understand how to capitalise on some 30 years later when they explored a new field of behavioural research known as 'Motivational Intervention'.

Motivational Intervention (MI) was specifically developed to deal with groups of individuals who continue to be naysayers in spite of compelling factual evidence to the contrary. (Think about vaccination 'deny-ers' who resolutely will not expose their children to vaccines or investors who persist in thinking that past performance suggests comparable outcomes in the future.) Its real power is that it helps people both resolve ambivalent feelings and insecurities about new insights or paradigms while creating an empathetic framework for changing their behaviour to incorporate these new insights.

MI is particularly effective with angry or hostile people who may not be ready to commit to change and as such, need to be taken through the emotional stages of change necessary to find what their motivation should be to change. It recognises that the root of resistance is often a social one where people gain comfort from being part of a group of like-minded people. But if the therapist can empathetically drill down to what it is that the individual really values, demonstrate how those same values can be even more effectively addressed by the new paradigm, and then map out a practical framework for applying this new paradigm, this change process can be particularly effective.

Fifteen minutes of continued self-deprecation and Erhard had us eating out of the palm of his hand. He and his audience were one and the same: intellectuals who were sceptical about every simplistic solution. Once that alignment was clear, it was remarkable how easily he managed to convince his audience that all we had to do to end world hunger was simply put out the word to the rest of the world thinkers that (and I quote him here): 'Ending world hunger is an idea whose time had come!'

Apparently, all we had to do to get people to solve a global problem was convince everyone else that the time had come for the problem to be solved. Now we just had to reach under our seats for an envelope. In this envelope we would then deposit \$50 .... which of course would be used by the est foundation to spread this same message far and wide. Now who among us would have the courage not to follow that instruction?

We would regale many a dinner party in years to come with this story of the brazen absurdness of that Madison Square Garden rally.



Then – in September 2019, I attended the World Economic Forum Africa Summit in Cape Town. As they say, it was ‘like *déjà vu* all over again’. Here was a gathering of the greatest political, economic and social elite of Africa agreeing in unison that ‘an African Continental Free Trade Agreement was an idea whose time had come’. That ‘fulfilling the 17 SDGs (sustainable development goals) for Africa was an idea whose time had come’, That ‘solving for the skills required in Africa by the changing world of work and the Fourth Industrial Revolution was an idea whose time had come’. And they had paid good money to make that commitment.



Could it really be that simple? No concrete plans were actually discussed on how any of this would be achieved. For example, we could all easily engage in a universal condemnation of corruption in African governments, but no one actually had any practical suggestions on how we could convince people from engaging in it. President Mnangagwa of Zimbabwe helpfully pointed out that what the South African leader President Cyril Ramaphosa might be calling ‘corruption’ would probably be considered as simply ‘business facilitation’ in Zimbabwe. As such, there might be some differences in definition to sort out at the start. But we all agreed, to some extent, that we should all start ‘pointing in the same direction’. That, in itself, was a miracle of sorts.

The surprising lesson here is that it is easy to be cynical about such forums (probably easier to be cynical about **est** and Werner Erhard than the World Economic Forum) – but both exercises highlight the point that for change to occur, we need to first change the narrative. Using Werner Erhard’s language:

*We discover that as human beings we can live in a possibility instead of in what we have inherited, that instead of just being a human being because we were born that way, we can declare the possibility of being for human beings. This is the work of transformation: bringing forth a breakthrough in the possibility of being human.*



Getting people to change their mind is intrinsically linked to a sense of belonging to something. If you can convince people that by belonging, they are better empowered to effect change, this can operate as an effective catalyst for mobilising popular support.